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PANIC IN ORGANIZED COLLECTIVITIES*

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A. PURPOSE

One aspect of group behavior which has received little attention is that of panic behavior. The existing literature has tended to focus on panic in unorganized mobs or crowds. The analyses of the panic behavior in the famous Coconut Grove Fire (32) and the "Invasion from Mars" broadcast (8) are representative of this type of study.

Brown (5) suggested that, in the study of panic behavior, it is important to distinguish between unorganized and organized collectivities. McDougall (22) defined organized collectivities as those possessing the following characteristics: continuity of existence, awareness of membership, interaction with other organizations, a body of traditions, and differentiation of function. Unorganized collectivities were characterized by the absence of the above. An example of the former would be the Church or the Army, while the latter would be exemplified by street crowds or a theatre audience.

It is the purpose of this paper to review the literature on panic in organized collectivities (i.e., military groups) and to present a theoretical framework within which this behavioral phenomenon may be explained. The understanding and prediction of the behavior of organized formal groups cannot be considered complete without the ability to predict those conditions which are likely to cause the group no longer to function, or even to exist, as a group.

Examination of the literature on military panic reveals little substantive material suitable to analytic treatment. For the most part, the literature is very speculative and abstract in nature. With a few exceptions (3, 20), it is difficult to find actual descriptions of military panics either by participants or by eyewitnesses. Most of the generalized accounts to be found are of limited utility because of their inaccuracy and/or inadequacy (26).

B. THE NATURE OF PANIC

Foreman (15) suggested that there were two conceptions of panic prevalent in the sociological and social-psychological literature. The first conception, as

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represented by Cantril (7) and Janis (18) refers to the feelings and/or the overt behavior of a terrorized individual—a person who is utterly demoralized or distraught, and then gripped by an intense state of fear and anxiety. This intense emotional state, according to this point of view, may or may not lead to flight behavior.

The second conception of panic noted by Foreman (15) considers rout or flight behavior occurring in face-to-face contact groups to be the central core in the definition of panic behavior. A second point of difference between these conceptions refers to the perceived possibility of escape as a factor in panic behavior. The first point of view states that panic rarely occurs unless no possibility of escape exists, while the second position contends that panic will occur *only* when avenues of possible escape are evident.

The basic assumption of this paper is an acceptance of the second point of view. Thus, panic is defined in accordance with Quarantelli (26) as "an acute fear reaction marked by a loss of self-control which is followed by non-social and nonrational flight behavior." To this may be added the notion that panic occurs only in the presence of the perceived possibility of escape from the threatening situation.

In his excellent analysis of the nature of panic, Quarantelli (26) examined both overt and covert features of panic. The most outstanding overt feature was found to be flight from a threatening situation. Hence, in panic, there is no attempt to control or manipulate the threat where this is a possibility. "The only action taken toward the threat is to get away from it" (26).

Quarantelli (26) conceives of panic as being nonsocial rather than anti-social; i.e., there is a complete breakdown in group cohesion and there is no attempt to act jointly or in cooperation with others.

As to the covert features of panic, Quarantelli (26) noted that the prime factor is a very direct and immediate sense of threat to physical survival leading to intense fear and loss of self-control. Quarantelli also suggests that panic is nonrational rather than irrational in that panic participants do not consider the consequences of their flight behavior nor do they consider alternative courses of action.

C. CONDITIONS CAUSING PANIC

There exists a wide spectrum of opinion in the literature as to the causes of military panic. The one theme prevalent in most discussions of military panic is that of fear and the immediate threat to physical survival. Loss of confidence in the group's leader is often mentioned as a cause (1, 4, 11, 12, 21, 27, 28, 31). LaPiere (19); Farago (14); Stone (30); and Caldwell,

Ranson, and Sachs (6) consider the perception of a threat for which there is no prepared or routinized behavior as a prime cause. Prolonged waiting in anticipation of battle is noted as a cause by Eltlinge (13), Brousseau (4); and Farago (14).

Some writers have stressed individual predispositions to panic. Strauss (31), in surveying this literature, divided these factors into the following: (a) those that physically weaken men—like intoxication, bad health, poor nourishment, or fatigue; (b) those that lessen mental ability—like confusion, doubt, and uncertainty; and (c) those that produce high emotional tension and heightened imagination.

Foreman (15) lists the following predisposing conditions to panic: (a) acute fatigue which weakens individuals organically, (b) worry about lack of information concerning expected attacks which creates acute emotional tensions and anxiety, (c) novice or stranger status which prevents or impoverishes self-satisfying group identifications, and (d) awareness of such weapons as guided missiles and napalm which incite chronic social unrest.

D. DISCUSSION

Thus, the literature suggests the operation of a set of variables which may predispose an organized collectivity to panic flight. Foreman (15) noted that "although background conditions are not causal factors of panic, deliberate attempts to induce or reinforce terror or panic should succeed more readily where conditions known to be present in prior instances are clearly present and compounded." These predispositional variables would seem to operate to weaken men both physically and psychologically, and so cause them to be more easily influenced by rumor and suggestion and to render them less capable of rationally interpreting ambiguous situations.

The literature also suggests the operation of certain variables which are capable of precipitating panic flight, either in combination with the predispositional variables or independently if of sufficient intensity.

Brown (5) noted that practically every writer on panic invokes at least one principle of contagion. Imitation, mimicry, and suggestion are mentioned by Percin (25); Eltlinge (13); Brousseau (4); Munson (24); Maxwell (21); Coste (11); Strauss (31); Caldwell, Ranson, and Sachs (6); and Quarantelli (26). In an investigation of seven panic incidents in World War II, Marshall (20) found that each incident had the same origin: the sight of a few members of the group in full and unexplained flight to the rear. One or a few men made a sudden run to the rear, which others in the vicinity did not understand.

In every case, the testimony of all the witnesses clearly developed the fact that those who started to run, and thereby spread the fear which started the panic, had a legitimate, or at least a reasonable excuse, for the action. It was not the sudden motion which of itself did the damage but the fact that others present were not kept informed (20, p. 146).

Unfortunately, these accounts gave no indication of the existence of any of the predispositional variables discussed above.

The second precipitating variable involves the exposure to a threat (i.e., weapon) for which there is no prepared behavior. This was exemplified in the First World War when the Germans introduced two new and (at the time) terrifying weapons for which there had been no training on the part of the Allied troops—gas warfare and the *Flammenwerfer* (flamethrower). A complete panic flight was the result with those who survived the initial assaults by these weapons (2). In subsequent exposures, however, after informational and training programs had been given the Allied troops, the incidence of panic was extremely rare. The troops had learned of the nature of the weapons and how to cope with them.

With respect to the predispositional variables, the point is made that all the factors mentioned above are found by definition in combat at one time or another. Yet, history does not record a high incidence of panic among military groups. That these conditions have been noted in troops who have panicked seems to be true, but that military units have experienced these conditions, often to a high degree of intensity, and not panicked is equally true. To what, then, can be attributed the occurrence of panic behavior in military groups?

An explanatory model based upon the concept of group cohesiveness is offered. Cartwright and Zander (9) discuss a cohesive group as one in which the members all work together for a common goal and everyone is ready to assume responsibility for the group tasks.

The willingness to endure pain or frustration for the group is yet another indication of cohesiveness. Finally, we may conceive of a cohesive group as one in which its members will defend against external criticism or attack (9, p. 74).

With the added notions that (a) the group may become a haven for protection from a threatening environment and thus become a means to satisfy the need for security (17), and (b) there are external restraints which serve to keep the group intact; a small army unit would seem reasonably to fit the definition of a cohesive group.

It is but a short step to make the further assumption that the small

cohesive army unit can be considered a primary group (10) in that it is characterized by an intimate, face-to-face relationship, a warm emotional tone, and involves close physical proximity.

In a military environment, the individual soon finds himself isolated from his civilian primary group. Shils and Janowitz (29) suggested that, as a result, the individual soldier comes to depend more and more upon his military primary group for satisfaction of basic needs, affection, security, status, etc. Serving to reinforce the satisfactions and the demands and expectations of this group are the officially prescribed rules and external authority which serve to hold his aggressiveness in its proper context.

Thus, in their analysis of the ability of the Wehrmacht to maintain a high degree of organizational integrity in spite of their continual strategic reverses, Shils and Janowitz (29) conclude:

Where conditions were such as to allow primary group life to function smoothly and where the primary group developed a high degree of cohesion, morale was high and resistance effective. . . . The motivation of the determined resistance of the German soldier was the steady satisfaction of certain primary personality demands afforded by the social organization of the army.

Accordingly, it is hypothesized that the social disorganization of panic in organized collectivities is dependent to a large measure on the capacity of the immediate primary group to avoid social disintegration. When this primary group is able adequately to satisfy the individual's physiological and social-psychological needs, then the element of self-concern is minimized. Conversely, when the primary group life is disrupted by the predispositional and/or precipitating variables discussed above, an intensity of preoccupation with physical survival develops and the attraction to remain a member of the group is minimized.

Studies of combat personnel (17) have emphasized the importance of group identification as a major motivational factor underlying efficient performance in the face of danger. Inherent in this is the notion that the tendency to abandon one's duty or to escape from the situation is often held in check by the strong motivation to avoid letting the other members of the group down.

An interesting heuristic outgrowth of this conceptualization would be a replication of the study by Mintz (23), who suggested that the nonadaptive character of panic behavior can be explained in terms of the perceived reward structure of the situation. His results were interpreted as confirming the theory that panic results from the perception of an unstable reward structure.

It would seem worthwhile to replicate Mintz's study using as Ss groups varying in degrees of cohesiveness.

Discussion of other theories which have been advanced to explain panic behavior is beyond the scope of the present paper. The reader is referred to McDougall (22), Freud (16), LaPiere (19), Mintz (23), and Foreman (15).

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